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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to counseling that synthesizes psychological processes of change with theological concepts of the Christian faith. The approach assumes that persons can be self-directing and that persons are responsible for their behavior, including the changes counseling is intended to facilitate. The counselor's job is to equip clients to enable them to change. Key objectives in Christian counseling are to help clients accept themselves as worthy and valuable because they are God's creatures, give up their standards of conditional self-worth, accept responsibility for their fallibilities and faults, and adopt an overriding goal of being responsibly loving in all their thoughts and actions. There are descriptions of significant stages of the counseling process: meeting the client, equipping the client for change, and facilitating change. Also included is a discussion of the roles of justification, responsibility, forgiveness, grace, sin, responsible loving, and prayer. (Author)

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# Christian Counseling:

# A Synthesis of Psychological and Christian Concepts*

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# Christian Counseling:
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## Abstract

This paper describes an approach to counseling that synthesizes psychological processes of change with theological concepts of the Christian faith. The approach assumes that persons can be self-directing and that persons are responsible for their behavior, including the changes counseling is intended to facilitate. The counselor's job is to equip clients to enable them to change. Key objectives in Christian counseling are to help clients accept themselves as worthy and valuable because they are God's creatures, give up their standards of conditional self-worth, accept responsibility for their fallibilities and faults, and adopt an overriding goal of being responsibly loving in all their thoughts and actions. The counseling process is described in the stages of meeting the client, equipping the client for change, and facilitating change. The roles of justification, responsibility, forgiveness, grace, sin, responsible loving, and prayer in the process are discussed.

Christian Counseling:

A Synthesis of Psychological and Christian Concepts

Christian counseling is a synthesis of psychological procedures for achieving therapeutic change in an interview with the values and realities of faith in Jesus Christ. Christian counseling as a synthesis is a relatively new approach to counseling, and several formulations are emerging from psychologists (Crab, 1975; Collins, 1972; Strong, 1977) and theologians (Adams, 1970). This description arises from my experiences in Christian counseling the last two years.

Key Concepts in the Process and Content of Christian Counseling

Many of the underlying concepts in Christian counseling from psychology relate to the process of change while many of the underlying theological concepts relate to the content of change. In fact, the process of change in terms of the dynamics operating to create change in verbal therapy is highly similar across approaches to counseling, while the content of change is often indicative of the special emphasis of the approach to counseling (Strong, 1978).

Any talking cure approach to treating psychological problems assumes that people's thinking is modifiable through conversation and that what people think affects what they do. These two assumptions present a view of man as thinking and self-directed--a view of man that is solidly Scriptural. Man is also viewed as responsive to environment, especially through his cognitive and conceptual tools. Approaching man in this way leads us to view counselors as having the job of equipping clients so that clients can change their lives. Counselors are resources to

clients who can help equip clients for the work of changing, but clients are responsible for change. Counselors can help equip clients in three areas: perception of cause, skills to act on the causes and to change, and will or motivation to change. Cause is a key to effective self-control, for what a person views as the cause of his problem defines the possibilities and pragmatics of change. Effective therapy requires causes which clients as the agents of change can control. As ideas, beliefs, and attitudes are modifiable in verbal interchange, they are ideal causes on which to focus in counseling.

Focusing on thinking patterns as the cause of psychological problems underscores Lewin's (1935) concern for contemporaneous causes. While events in clients' pasts may have led to clients having certain thought patterns, their perpetuation of the patterns of thinking is the contemporaneous cause of current problems. Likewise, Jesus emphasized that what a person does and says are the fruits of what is inside the person (Luke 6:43-45). Jesus put the responsibility for the person's behavior on the person, on his thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, and saw these as the targets of change. Scripture describes persons as created with free will and responsibility for their actions. I must acknowledge that Scripture also presents God's control over all events, and thus we have the mystery and truth of free will and determination existing side by side. In Christian counseling, the client is the agent of change. But also, God changes the client especially through the work of the Holy Spirit. God heals past injuries, gives wisdom and insight into current problems, and strengthens clients for change. At the same time, the client is responsible for turning away from the contemporaneous causes of the problem.

The content of counseling is the nomological framework within which behavior is interpreted. The content of an approach to counseling answers such questions as: what should people be like (the ideal model); what are people's difficulties; what are the causes of difficulties. Here we find the voluminous psychoanalytic literature, Ellis' "rational man," and Roger's concept of "self-actualization." Christian counseling views the ideal as Christ. Persons are viewed in two contradictory ways. Basically because people are God's creatures and creations, they are viewed as good. We were created with free will, intelligence, and a capacity for loving. We were created to need a close relationship with God. The Fall represents our other side. It demonstrates that we are indeed free to choose our fate and are inclined to misuse this gift. In partaking of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve used their gift to attempt to dispose of God. They wanted to set themselves up as all-knowing so as not to be dependent on God. This same tendency grips us today. We are prone to pridefully make ourselves the center of our existence and cut ourselves off from God. The prideful and selfish attitudes and actions that carry out this tendency are called sins and are the root of much psychological disturbance. To be whole, we need to be in close relationship with God. Our relationship with God defines our self-worth and our eternal existence, and without it we lose self-identity.

Psychological health rests on acceptance of self as beloved by God, ownership of fallibilities and faults, and responsible loving. Acceptance of self as a beloved of God is basic, because our self-worth rests in His love for us which is shown explicitly in creation and

redemption. Denial of this intrinsic worth is sinful in that it asserts that our own basis for determining self-worth (usually our works) is superior to God's.

Ownership of fallibilities and faults acknowledges that we are prone to make mistakes, be prideful, and be self-centered. These sins need to be acknowledged and forgiveness gratefully accepted. We need always to work away from sin, but remain aware of our fallibilities and weaknesses. Our weaknesses are in fact a blessing in that they keep us needful of God.

Finally, we need to adopt Christ's great commandment as the purpose of our lives--to love one another as He loved us. This means that the purpose of our relationships with one another is to help one another know God better. We should seek this goal even at the cost of self-sacrifice, and we should see ourselves as God's instruments on earth. This is what I have termed responsible loving (Strong, 1977). Responsibile loving is the basis of the relationship between counselor and client, guides the evaluation of all events in counseling, and is the goal of counseling.

## The Process of Change in Christian Counseling

The process of change in Christian counseling can be viewed in three phases which are descriptively labeled Meeting the Client, Equipping the Client, and Facilitating Change.

### Meeting the Client

All counseling must begin where the client is. Change must begin there and proceed in steps the client can manage to a point closer to

the ideal. In Christian counseling the process of change begins with the counselor's attitude toward the client and the actions which flow from the attitude. In the counselor's eyes, the client is a beloved child of God. The client is a fellow traveler under the Cross. Created perfect and destined to perfection in Christ, the client is suffering from a cumulation of injurious circumstances and wrong choices that have led the client away from the light of God. The counselor believes that the client deeply wishes to be in contact with God and be in the will of God. The counselor is prepared to endure whatever comes in his or her journey with the client in the faith that God will heal this prized child and enable him or her to respond in His will.

The counselor's love for the client leads to a prizing of and a belief in the client, whatever he or she has done. The counselor's love for the client also leads to a highly emotional involvement with the client. The client's pains and suffering are deeply felt. The client's willful breech with the will of God is borne with sadness and sorrow for the great cost such a breech has for the client. Joys of success and victory are fully shared. In love there is no room for professional detachment. The counselor listens to the client with the ears of God so as to serve the purposes of God as one of God's instruments in the client's life.

A major method in the first phase of counseling is empathic listening. To be helpful, the counselor must transport himself into the client's world. The client's emotional responses to his or her experiences must be clearly opened and discerned. The circumstances under which the emotions are generated need to be laid bare, as it is from the emotions and circumstances that the cognitive cause of the problem can be identified.

Equipping the Client

Equipping clients to handle their problems requires reanalysing and reinterpreting their behavioral circumstances to identify handles they can use to gain control of the situation. Usually these handles are in the way clients think and evaluate. Change is internal to clients and bears fruit in clients' actions and emotions.

Leading clients to accept personal responsibility for their problems usually requires breaking current justifications they have for their actions. For example, in marriage counseling I inevitably find that the conflict is sustained by what I have termed the sin-justification cycle (Strong, 1976, 1977). Each is hateful to the other, attacking, resentful, punishing, and vindictive, and each justifies these distinctly unloving behaviors by pointing to the other's distinctly unloving behaviors. Each feels compelled to protect him- or herself and bring the other to repentence by attacking the other more viciously; the other's similar behavior justifies this and removes personal responsibility. Such justification must be eliminated to allow the persons to perceive their own behaviors and attitudes as the causes of their problems.

Justification can usually be eliminated by showing persons that they have several alternatives to their actions. To generate alternatives the Christian counselor turns to the model of Christ and the concept of responsible loving. More deeply, the whole philosophy that one's actions can be justified and personal responsibility removed by external circumstances must be attacked and eliminated. Research on attribution theory in social psychology has shown that most adults

believe that they are responsible for their actions only if they cannot otherwise account for them (Strong, 1978). This is a legacy of Freudian and Behavioral Psychologies and is a pernicious and non-Scriptural view. Under this philosophy, I hit my wife because she hit me; I am depressed because she left me, and I am angry because I was slighted. I am but a pawn of external events, not an agent of events. The Bible teaches us that we are responsible for everything we do, and we will be judged accordingly. Justification is entirely swept aside.

Breaking current justifications and destroying the philosophy of justified commission leads clients to take responsibility for their actions. They confess that they are responsible for what is happening to them. They must be helped to focus on personal causes of their behavior which they can change and control. Ellis' ABC Theory identifies thoughts and attitudes as the cause, as does Jesus in His teachings on behavior.

The influences of the past, parents, physiology, and so on, are not ignored in Christian counseling. Historical causes are carefully rooted out to help clients see how they came to think as they do. These scars of the past are healed through prayer and forgiveness so that they will lose their power over the person. Until they are healed, the individual will have difficulty turning forcibly against the ideas they generated. At times the wounds of the past are so severe that the person's agency is lost, and we have no recourse but to pray for healing and deliverance.

To illustrate the attitudes and ideas identified as creating or causing the client's problems, let us look at the symptom of anger and

its bedfellows, resentment, bitterness, and depression. In Christian counseling these symptoms are seen as the result of three events: first, the person sees some ability, skill, recognition, or treatment as something he or she has a right to; secondly, the right is violated; thirdly, the person requires vengeance for the loss to restore equity.

Sin as the root of the anger, bitterness, resentment, or depression can be seen at two points. First, the individual requires vengeance to restore equity. In our equity-oriented society, as clearly shown in social psychology (Strong, 1978), this seems natural enough. Unfortunately, the demand for vengeance rarely leads to a solution to the problem. Beyond that, Yahweh early and persistently in Scriptural revelation has insisted that "vengeance is mine." When we demand vengeance, we take God's prerogatives on ourselves and make ourselves God, clearly a sinful attitude akin to the original fruit incident. Our only recourse in Christ is to forgive--to give up our requirement of restoring equity and bear the loss. We are repeatedly commanded to forgive one another in Scripture.

The second causal sin is more serious than the first, and more to the real root of anger, bitterness, resentment, and depression. The belief or demand for rights or the requirement of certain events is based on our perception that the rights or events are essential for our self-worth. Somewhere we have come to believe that we are worthy as people only under certain circumstances, and our belief in conditional self-worth is the source of the emotional upheaval. Belief in conditional worth is unsurprising given our achievement-oriented society. In Christ our worth comes from what God has done

(creation and redemption), not from what we do. When we cling to a works-oriented conditional standard of worth, we reject God's standard and demand to use our own as better. We again have rejected God and put ourselves in His stead. We refuse to accept that we are intrinsically worthy, that we do not always do worthy things, and that we therefore need His forgiveness. Obviously, this is a grievous sin as it entails rejection of God and His act of forgiveness in Christ, and carries a great cost to us. The real solution to anger, depression, resentment, and bitterness is to accept God's view of us as precious because we are His creatures and remove the attitude of conditional works-oriented self-worth.

It should be apparent that equipping the client involves interpretation, confrontation, and instruction. Heavy use is made of Scripture. Prayer is also abundant as we turn to the Lord for insight and wisdom.

Facilitating Change

As clients become equipped for change, they come to accept responsibility for sinful ideas, attitudes, and actions. These are confessed and repented. Clients seek and receive forgiveness from God and develop humility and a joyfulness in receiving such grace. They open themselves up to God's love and acceptance as prized by God, as being worthy as His son or daughter. These inward changes are facilitated by prayers of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and absolution. Forgiveness plays a large part in facilitating change. Old resentments are surrendered and courage to struggle on is found in the knowledge that failures can be borne with forgiveness.

Change is facilitated by working through the events of the client's current and past life. How the client should behave in these incidents as a follower of Christ is worked out according to the ideas of responsible love and the model of Christ. The client's errors are uncovered, confessed, forgiven, and eliminated. In counseling we rehearse how to respond to upcoming challenges, and the relationships in counseling among counselor, client, spouse, and family members are used to practice new behaviors. At all times, the counselor models what the client is to do. The counselor assigns homework to carry out behaviors that need correcting or rehearsal to strengthen the client.

Faith in God increasingly becomes the bedrock of self-worth and the source of strength to put on new behaviors. The changes in attitudes and behaviors reinforce each other. Prayer is a constant source of strengthening. Finally, as the client becomes equipped and uses the equipment, he or she increasingly sees the counselor more as a source of fellowship than of counsel.

Throughout Christian counseling prayer is a key process. I begin and end counseling sessions with prayer and pray during sessions as appropriate. The prayers are for thanksgiving, wisdom, insight, confession, forgiveness, absolution, healing, and strengthening. Prayer keeps both counselor and client mindful that God is the real agent of change and the Healer at work in Christian counseling.

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